

“THOUGHTS ARE THINGS”:  
HEAVEN AND HELL IN THE WORKS OF ROBERT A. MONROE  
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Robert A. Monroe (1915-1995) is the author of three books on his experiences with astral projection (what he prefers to call out-of-body experience): *Journeys Out of the Body* (JOOB), *Far Journeys* (FJ), and *Ultimate Journey* (UJ). *Journeys Out of the Body* is frequently taught in college courses. For example, I teach Chapter 8, “Cause the Bible Tells Me So”—in my freshman course, “The Human Experience: Who Am I?”—because it challenges my students’ conservative Christian assumptions about God, prayer, heaven, and hell. Monroe’s work is particularly relevant to the “spiritual passages” sub-theme of this conference because it describes his encounters with a variety of heavenly and hellish things on the nonphysical plane.

In Chapter 8, Monroe reports on his discovery of a heavenly place that he calls “Home” (with a capital H), as well as an area where so-called “devils” and “demons” assail him (JOOB 121). These findings, to be properly understood, require the addition of his later perspective in *Far Journeys* and *Ultimate Journey*, in which he develops a fuller cosmology by describing a series of “rings” that center on the earth. These rings, however, are not actual places but what Monroe’s biographer, Ronald Russell, calls “metaphors for states or phases of consciousness” (320). There Monroe discovers two principles that obtain in all of his experiences of heaven and hell, and I take them as my thesis about the nonphysical plane: thoughts are things, and like attracts like.

I begin with information from *Journeys Out of the Body*. Monroe distinguishes between Locale I (the physical world) and Locale II (the nonphysical world); and just across the border to the latter, he finds a “layer” (JOOB 120) that is reminiscent of damnation. He writes in Chapter 8, “It seems to be the part of Locale II closest to Here-Now, and in some way most related. It is a gray-black hungry ocean where the slightest motion attracts nibbling and tormenting beings. ... Could this be the borders of hell?” (JOOB 120-21). Monroe’s early explorations also include an experience that corresponds to stereotypical notions of heaven. He encounters “pure peace”; exquisite emotions, particularly love and joy; warm clouds; and pleasing colors, music, and shapes. He has the sense that this is “Home,” and he writes:

Each of the three times I went There [with a capital T], I did not return voluntarily. I came back sadly, reluctantly. Someone helped me return. Each time after I returned, I suffered intense nostalgia and loneliness for days. I felt as an alien might among strangers in a land where things were not ‘right,’ where everything and everyone was so different and so ‘wrong’ when compared with where you belonged. Acute loneliness, nostalgia, and

something akin to homesickness. So great was it that I have not tried to go There again. Was this heaven? (JOOB 123-25).

Monroe's early experiences lacked the benefit of his later discoveries, which led to a fairly comprehensive cosmology that I will describe as a context for "heaven" and "hell" in Chapter 8. To begin with, he calls earth a "Human School of Compressed Learning," which, "for all its shortcomings, is an exquisite teaching machine" (FJ 257 and UJ 83). What is it that we are supposed to learn? Monroe's answer is love. And in order to maximize the human experience, we must embrace the time-space illusion as truth and accept "[t]he blanking or sublimation of previous experience" (FJ 249). In other words, we have to affirm life in the temporal-physical realm as real, and we must forget that we have had previous lifetimes as well as experiences in the nonphysical world *in between* lifetimes. But such information is embedded in the subconscious and can be accessed in altered states through meditation, particularly with the aid of Hemi-Sync®, an audio system that Monroe, a former radio man, developed at his institute in rural Virginia.

When asked the purpose of this physical human life, Monroe replied without hesitation. "The purpose of life," he said, "is to realize that thoughts are things."<sup>1</sup> He means, as I like to tell my students, that thoughts are *energetic* things that can *manifest* and *travel*. Throughout his three books, he stresses that as you *think*, so will you also *be*—a version of the "Law of Attraction" popularized by the recent film *The Secret*. For example, in Chapter 8, he writes:

In these worlds where thoughts are not only things, but are everything, including you, your poison or your perfection is of your own making. ... Your destination in the heaven or hell of Locale II seems to be grounded completely within the framework of your deepest constant (and perhaps non-conscious) motivations, emotions, and personality drives. ... The least stray desire at the wrong time, or a deep-seated emotion I wasn't aware of, diverts my trip in that "like" direction. (JOOB 121)<sup>2</sup>

Monroe discovers that, in the nonphysical world, "thoughts are things" and "like attracts like" are organizing principles. Specifically, around the physical earth are a series of "recycling rings" or "human energy rings" or "semitransparent radiant globes" (FJ 94 and 101; UJ 32). He means that these concentric spheres are where souls go before they recycle back into the

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<sup>1</sup> This statement was quoted by David Mulvey, a trainer at The Monroe Institute, during a Gateway course in 1997.

<sup>2</sup> As he puts it earlier, "As Human Minds, we are what we think"; "thought is the wellspring of existence"; "As you think, so you are"; and "Like attracts like." Or this: "In Locale II, reality is composed of deepest desires and most frank fears. Thought is action, and no hiding layers of conditioning or inhibition shield the inner you from others, where honesty is the best policy because there can be nothing less" (JOOB 71, 74, 75, and 77). Preston Dennet in his book *Out-of-Body Exploring: A Beginner's Approach* clarifies the importance of thoughts as things in the nonphysical state. He writes: "The experience [creating objects during an OBE] proved to me that the astral plane is composed of a material that responds to our thoughts. This is why the occultists are so fond of saying that 'thoughts are things'" (45). Later he adds: "I used to think of the astral world as being made up of only energy. This may be true, but I am continually surprised by how *physical* events feel. In the astral world, we are able to duplicate any experience we have on earth. The material of the astral world seems to conform to our thoughts, and we create and project utterly convincing environments" (50).

physical, each ring containing a collection of souls who share the same “frequencies” or thought patterns (*FJ* 64). His metaphor for this metaphorical ring system is the “Interstate” because he perceives it to be “a major highway into the Unknown” (*UJ* 110). The “entry ramps” are physical death (*UJ* 228); there are “exit ramps” for the various soul states (*UJ* 126 and 202-3); there are “highways and byways” (*UJ* 14); and he eventually discovers “a bridge or bypass over ... [the dangerous] areas—with Caution signs posted along the way” (*UJ* 124).<sup>3</sup>

Monroe discovers that these rings have a coherent pattern. Halfway out is what he calls the “null point” (*FJ* 199), a sort of dividing line between souls for whom the time-space illusion is foremost and souls for whom nonphysical reality is the primary construct. The closer to the earth a ring appears, the more temporal-spatial its inhabitants will be and the sooner they will reincarnate; the further beyond the null point, the more *nontemporal-spatial* the inhabitants will be and the longer they remain before reincarnation. The individual rings, though not infinite, expand to accommodate different types of human experience. Again, thoughts are things: as new thoughts arise, they are accommodated in the afterlife.

A few examples will illustrate the organization just sketched. The innermost ring is for souls who do not realize that they are no longer physically alive. They therefore attempt to participate in physical life without success; they are “totally and compulsively bonded to time-space materiality,” with “extreme distortions of the original survival imprint” (*FJ* 239-40). Closely akin to these sorry souls are those who know that they are dead but who remain addicted to the physical and are unaware of other possibilities; this area includes those whom Monroe calls “Wild Ones,” souls who assume that, because they are dead, their bad behavior no longer matters (*FJ* 240). The best example is analogous to the second circle of Dante’s *Inferno*. Monroe calls it the Flesh Pile, a “huge mass of ex-physical humans, [who are] writhing and struggling in an endless [futile] attempt to have sex with one another” (*UJ* 128). They are so addicted to sex that they are undeterred by lack of copulative success and “unaware of any other existence” (*FJ* 89); Monroe cannot even get their attention.

Out from there, Monroe found the largest ring, which contains what he calls the Belief System Territories. I want to pause on that concept and provide some examples relevant to Chapter 8 because this is where “heaven” and “hell” are located in the Monroe cosmology (*FJ* 245; Russell 312). The Belief System Territories are an area with as many “exit ramps” as there are addictive human beliefs. The area is for those who know that they are dead but who are unable to transcend particular thought patterns. Remember: thoughts are things, and like attracts like. Monroe writes of the inhabitants, “*Their belief system is all they have to go on. So they go where they think there is some kind of security*” (*UJ* 175; Monroe’s emphasis here and below). For example, this is where you go to be with those who share the same dogmatic

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Leva furthers the Interstate metaphor in her volume *Traveling the Interstate of Consciousness: A Driver’s Instruction Manual*, for those who want to take the metaphor to its most tedious extreme.

religious beliefs, as is clear when a female soul calls the astrally projected Monroe “*spawn of the devil*” (FJ 195); and another remarks, “*Our minister says there is no such person as a visitor here*” (FJ 199). He also encounters a slightly more self-aware soul who has the opposite view of earthly religion: “Nobody told me it was going to be like this! Those bastards yelling and screaming about gates of heaven, hellfire and damnation—they didn’t know what they were talking about!” (UJ 121). Nonetheless, it is probably here in the Belief System Territories that Monroe encounters something that reminds him of common preconceptions of heaven: an experience of “indescribable joy” so intense that his guide has to shield him from it (FJ 179).

The next ring out includes “*Fantasy Land*” or “*The Park*” (FJ 196; UJ 237), an area that other writers call “*Summerland*.” Monroe writes, “It was a place to calm down in after the trauma of physical death—a way station, for relaxation and decision as to what to do next” (UJ 237). As in the Belief System Territories, thoughts are things: the place is a “human creation” (UJ 238). Here you can do whatever you want, provided that you do not violate anyone else’s free will. Beyond the Park is a ring for “*Last-Timers*” who await their final incarnation. And beyond that are the “*I-There*” clusters—soul groups “containing all [of one’s] previous and present lifetimes” (UJ 139), which await the return of their individual parts. Eventually Monroe discovers that he is a probe or scout sent from his soul cluster to play a crucial role in its development.

Earlier I referred to the *Flesh Pile*—the greatest hell in Monroe’s works—as Dantesque; but that is only partly correct. In the rings as in the *Inferno*, thoughts are things; but in Monroe’s cosmology progress is possible because thoughts can be dynamic. As souls become “*hooked*” (FJ 142) on the earth experience, they drop to a lower ring with each incarnation, but there is also upward progress even in the afterlife. A terrific example comes not from Monroe but from a student of his system of meditation named Bruce Moen whose book *Voyage Beyond Doubt* contains a chapter entitled “*Max’s Hell*.” In life, Max was “a mean-spirited, gifted, emotional sadist,” who now inhabits “a Hell made to order for him. Everyone living there with him, every man, woman, and child, had the same emotionally sadistic nature he did!” (87-88). Like attracts like. He is now trapped in “a vicious circle of sadism” (91), which he both inflicts and suffers. But thoughts are things: “If he ever begins to question his choice of beliefs,” writes Moen, “it will be the beginning of leaving his Hell. ... he’ll be pushed out of his Hell by a repulsive force” (89-90).

The *I-There* cluster’s short-term goal is to recover errant probes like Max, but its long-term objective is to achieve “*escape velocity*” (FJ 246)—that is, to acquire enough experience and love energy to escape the addictive gravity of the Human Compressed Learning System. (The metaphor has shifted from driving to rocketry, complete with “*lift-off points*” [FJ 261]). Then souls just disappear—on their way to another lifetime on earth, another realm of experience, or (as Monroe implies in Chapter 8) to union with the Godhead (JOOB 122).

The final metaphorical pieces of the Monroe cosmology—metaphorical because language can only indirectly capture the essence of ineffable experience in the spirit world—lie beyond the I-There clusters: an “Aperture,” through which one enters and exits the Earth Learning System; and an “Emitter,” the energy source that creates the hologram or dream in which we live (*UJ* 215-16 and 219). The Creator—whose existence Monroe does affirm—lies beyond Aperture and Emitter (*UJ* 224) but is not the God of Sunday school lessons.

The journey just charted, from earth to infinity, includes one of the states that Monroe mentions in Chapter 8: the terror of demons or demon-like beings that try to gnaw at him. I suspect that he would say that just as the Flesh Pile is a perversion of the survival instinct, the gnawing demons are perversions of the predatory instinct (indeed he proposes a “predator theory” of earthly life [Russell 287]). Howard Storm clarifies the matter in his account of his near-death experience in his book, *My Descent into Death and the Message of Love Which Brought Me Back*.<sup>4</sup> Storm encounters Monroe’s “nibbling and tormenting beings” (*JOOB* 120) in an area of the Interstate that Monroe eventually learned to pass through unimpeded and quickly as if on the previously mentioned “bridge.” Again, thoughts are things, and like attracts like: Storm experiences such negativity because he lived a life of bottled-up anger, “[d]evoid of love, hope, and faith” and centered on self-interest. He writes, “It dawned on me that I was not unlike these miserable creatures that had tormented me” (26).

Unlike the gnawing hell, Monroe’s experience of Home may not be situated on the Interstate at all. Home is essentially his extra-terrestrial—and nonphysical—point of origin, which he arbitrarily calls KT-95. Apparently his spiritual essence is nonhuman. When he later returns to Home he discovers why he left in the first place: the clouds, the music, the colors—everything is on “a repeating loop” (*UJ* 26). He left Home prior to his many physical earth incarnations because of curiosity to experience something new. He now knows that he does not belong there because there is “no growth, nothing new to learn or experience” (*UJ* 30). Home is “a blind alley” (*UJ* 209).

To sum up, Monroe’s experiences of gnawing beings and of Home in Chapter 8 seem to take place outside the Belief System Territories, where he later came to locate heaven and hell: the gnawing beings are close to the earth, and Home is extraterrestrial. Only the heaven-like place of “indescribable joy” may be part of a belief system.

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<sup>4</sup> Storm writes: “Now I was being forced by a mob of unfeeling people toward some unknown destination in the encroaching darkness. They began shouting and hurling insults at me, demanding that I hurry along. The more miserable I became, the more enjoyment they derived from my distress. ... The hopelessness of my situation overwhelmed me. I told them I would go no further, to leave me alone, and that they were liars. I could feel their breath on me as they shouted and snarled insults. They began to push and shove me about. I began to fight back. A wild frenzy of taunting, screaming, and hitting ensued. ... These creatures were once human beings. The best way I can describe them is to think of the worst imaginable person stripped of every impulse of compassion” (19-20).

I want to conclude with the implications of the system that Monroe maps out. Perhaps his most important statement concerns the following “Known Basic” (i.e., fundamental insight) for which he searches in *Ultimate Journey*: “The physical universe, including the whole of humankind, is an ongoing creative process. There is indeed a Creator” (*UJ* 224). Humans are co-creators; and growth is possible—not just through physical incarnation or reincarnation but also through progress in the afterlife, which is why Monroe created a soul retrieval course called “Lifeline” at his institute for those who would like to assist nonphysical guides in helping souls make their transition or move to a higher ring. In the nonphysical world, thoughts attract like thoughts; as Monroe’s experiences suggest, we will end up in a ring that resonates with our thoughts and desires in life. As we work toward a metaphorical “graduation” from the Earth Learning System, then, it is helpful to remember that the notion of thoughts as things is both a caveat and an opportunity. I will leave you with this statement from *Ultimate Journey*: “The idea that every thought I may have that is tinged with emotion radiates uncontrolled outward to others is heavy with implication” (189). As the works of Robert A. Monroe suggest, if you want to have a happy afterlife, be really careful what you think.

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